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HUAC Hearings: Aid to the Enemy?

By Marquis Childs

IN ASSESSING the damage done by the House Un-American Activities Committee the effect of that wrestling match on the foreign audience ranks high. Those televised scenes of witnesses and attorneys being dragged from the hearing room are even now being shown in Peking and North Vietnam.

In the propaganda drive to hold the North Vietnamese in the war they are offered as evidence that the brutal hirelings of imperialism will go to any length to suppress the true representatives of the American people. In this propaganda exercise these representatives being trundled off to jail speak for a majority of all Americans.

That is a measure of the harm the hearings have done. They give a tiny splinter of peaceniks—by their own admission not more than 5000 in the whole country—an opening for worldwide exposure and martyrdom. Before that opening their attempt to dramatize their opposition to the war had fallen off almost to zero.

Whether the masters at the top in Hanoi and Peking believe their own propaganda no one can say. Shut away in their airtight ideological prison they seem to have an infinite capacity for self-deception. But, belief or merely cynical propaganda, the uproar in the committee room was a godsend to the Communists bent on fighting the war in Vietnam to the bitter end. See, they are saying, here you have it—only force holds free Americans from revolting against the military and the capitalists waging a war of aggression against the Vietnamese people.

UNDERSCORING the damage is the fact that active opposition to President Johnson's policy in Vietnam has, with the exception of the peaceniks, all but subsided. Sen. J. William Fulbright, the most articulate of the congressional critics, in an interview the other day said in effect that opposition was futile since the Congress was more warlike than the President. He was saying to Hanoi that the Johnson Administration

means to go through with the war no matter what the cost in escalation.

Aside from the Communist capitals, the damage elsewhere in the world and here at home cannot be discounted. The scenes of disorder and violence will have a powerful impact in Western Europe where the long-drawn-out tragedy of the war is equated by critics with a quality of recklessness and savagery in the American temperament. The fact that the disorder was begun by the witnesses is irrelevant for the foreign audience, since their martyrdom in being brought before the committee in the first place is established by the past record of what appears in European eyes to be a sinister inquisitorial body with no objective other than to harass anyone whose views are to the left of center.

It may be that past experience with the committee's wild divagations has blunted the effect at home. What, they're at it again? This cannot, however, be taken for granted. Despite the disclaimer of the acting chairman, Rep. Joe Pool of Texas, that there was no intention to deny the right of dissent the line between intellectual criticism of Vietnam policy and acts such as trying to stop a troop train will be blurred.

IN A CLIMATE of concern as the consequences of the war bite deeper and deeper with the number of American troops close to the 300,000 mark the emotions generated in the hearing room can be infectious. The short way with dissenters—bounce them out and put them in jail—that was the lesson of the hearings shown on television throughout the Nation.

As for the cast of characters the most vengeful and satirical film-maker could not have improved on it. Joe Pool looks like an Alabama sheriff ready at the drop of a bull whip to throw his deputies around the courthouse. He is said to be delighted by the whole affair since it cast him in the role of Communist destroyer and thereby put his right-wing Republican opponent in Dallas in the shade. Such exposure on television was a boon that couldn't have been bought with all the campaign funds in Texas.

The young peaceniks were cast with equal verisimilitude. They were brash, rude, obstreperous, bent on causing as much trouble as possible given a golden opportunity to discredit Congress and the democratic process. That they were given the opportunity is the saddest commentary of all.

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